N° XVII.

THE THEATRICAL

CENSOR.

BY A CITIZEN.

I never bark'd when out of season;
I never bit without a reason.

BLACKLOCK.

PHILADELPHIA, March 3, 1806.

THOUGH the publication of the present number has been attended with some delay, it was never our intention either to withhold the few pages which might be necessary for connecting our labors, and giving them, in the hands of those who shall think them worthy of such preservation, the form of a volume, or to withdraw ourselves from our Readers without such parting words as decorum might call for, and our own anxiety for public indulgence suggest.

In commencing our task, we submitted some observations on the value of the Drama and the utility of Dramatic Criticism. It was not, indeed, to be supposed that those who were aware of the first could hesitate in acknowledging the second; and, accordingly, our design received the warmest approbation and patronage. Thus far every lover of the Stage was on our side; but, further than this it would have been unnatural to expect, and we never did expect, what, in a phrase which our play-house propensities must excuse, *universal applause*. We might reason-

ably have reckoned, and we did reckon, on being *clapped* and *hissed*, and, as far as the good will of many could assist us, *damned*. All this has come to pass. We say, all. We have taken the plaudits for our reward, and the rest for our destiny. One thing has been remarkable; but it could not surprise us. It was in the nature of our office to dispute the merits of this man, and the taste of that. It was to be apprehended that such dispute would excite anger, and that anger would vent itself in reply. What we call remarkable is, that no reply of this kind has ever been made by an individual possessed of education enough to write three lines of plain English! Why it does not surprise us we trust we may explain without exposing ourselves to the charge of vanity. We believe ourselves justified in concluding, from the uniform ignorance of our opponents, that our opinions have been more fortunate in their reception among persons of superior taste and information.

So deplorable is the ignorance, so complete the utter absence of all well-founded pretension to the humblest attainments, in the newspaper-vaporers to whom we allude, that we have seen one of them setting up a distinction between *eulogy* and *criticism*, as if eulogy were not a part, and the most pleasurable part, of criticism; and another, on a grand controversy in which we have taken no share, boldly pronouncing *mine*, the pronoun possessive, to be aukward and ungrammatical!

> You make me strange
> E'en to the disposition that I owe,
> When now I think you can behold such sights,
> And keep the nat'ral ruby of your cheeks,
> When *mine* are blanch'd with fear.

And there are in this city, not only writers to put such things upon paper, but editors to put them into print!

In this place, we must not avoid recurring to a contemptible periodical paper, at the expense of which we have, at times, attempted to amuse our readers, and, at others, taken more notice than, perhaps, it deserved; a paper of the existence of which we were not aware, till after it had long indulged itself in loading us with invectives, as malicious as absurd. We confess that, in the commencement of these attacks, we had suspected them to originate, where they would have been most excusable, in the *green-room;* a suspicion which the folly of the friends of one of the persons we were frequently obliged to censure more peculiarly encouraged. Here, however, we were mistaken, and we take pleasure in correcting our mistake. They proceeded from private rancour, growing out of circumstances wholly unconnected with the *Theatrical Censor*.

Some apology for our error may at the same time be allowed us, when it is recollected in how vulgar and indefensible a way all censure, whether political or literary, is, in this country, met by personalities. It would be idle to adduce instances of this, either in our own insignificant case, or in those more serious ones that are daily before the public.

To the rational part of our readers, we are confident that we have nothing to say in which we may not make ourselves sure of their concurrence. They never thought that all our decisions would coincide with theirs; and, therefore, they are not offended at our diversity of opinion, however frequently it may have occurred. They never thought that we pretended to impose upon the public those decisions as judgments without appeal; and, therefore, they do not accuse us of arrogance. A critic offers his opinion; be his language ever so dogmatic, he can do no

more. What he propounds in print amounts only to what others propound in conversation. He sets it up for no more, and it should be received for no more. The use that others are to make of it is to examine it, to judge it, to adopt it, if they please, and reject it, if they will:

> 'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none
> Go just alike, but each believes his own.

It is by this collision of judgments that taste is cultivated; and in this consists the recommendation of every critical work. As to those, whose waspish and irritable minds are fretted into rage and malevolence by every contradiction of their own sentiments, they must be placed among the sick, not among the sane. It is, perhaps, unavailing to offer them precepts; but, for the chance of benefit, they should, at the least, be reminded, that, on all questions connected with the Polite Arts, men should write and speak with congenial politeness; in other words, that, in all matters which concern only gentlemen, they should write and speak like gentlemen.

For the rest, we have great reason to congratulate ourselves, and still more the public, on having been the instrument by which the spirit of theatrical criticism has been not a little excited, however feebly or ungainly that spirit, still in its babyhood, may have been displayed. We repeat it, it is not a slavish acquiescence in our opinions that we hope for or desire: it is a habit of exercising the judgment, a discriminating habit, which must exist in the Audience, if there is to be merit on the Stage:

> The Drama's laws the Drama's patrons give.

Nor is it only within the circle of our own city that we have seen the Stage become an object of increased attention. During the appearance of our numbers, a paper

similar in its design and very praise-worthy in its execution (*The Thespian Mirror*) has received its birth at New York. We have also seen some good critiques in the *Boston Magazine*, the *Polyanthos*, and others. We even venture to hope, that this object will be zealously pursued in every part of the continent, in which a Theatre is supported.

With respect to the conduct of this paper, exclusively of the opinions it has conveyed, we have but little to say. Without obliging ourselves to a laborious attendance on every night's performance, we have, from time to time, offered such critiques as involve our judgment on the whole of the performances of the season. A more microscopic review must have wearied the reader with monotonous and twice-told observations, and mortified the actor, and enraged *our* critics, by multiplied detections of incapacity and negligence. On the whole, we have not, to our belief, passed by any fair opportunity of giving praise to merit, or been wanting, on any striking occasion, in our zeal to stigmatise whatever has disgraced the boards.

On the concluding night of the season, a novel object offered itself for our animadversion, in a sentimental comedy, performed for the first time, and the production of Mr. Charles Breck, a young gentleman of this city. Its title, *The Fox-chase* is by no means prepossessing; but it has merits to set on the opposite side of the account. Our earnest wish to see the growth of Taste and Native Literature advance in the United States, creates in us the warmest solicitude for the success of this and other attempts: in the present instance, we have no doubt that the next season will afford us more than one occasion of expressing a decided opinion.

We refer to the next season, because, as we have already announced, we shall then resume our labours; satisfied, as we are, that, in promoting, as far as we may the advancement of the stage, we shall promote many of the best interests of society:

The company, the shine of lights,
The scenes of humour, music's flights,
Adjust and set the soul to rights.

Life's moving pictures, well-wrought plays,
To others' griefs attention raise:
Here, while the tragic fictions glow,
We borrow joy by pitying wo;
There, gaily-comic scenes delight,
And hold true mirrors to our sight;
Virtue, in charming dress array'd,
Calling the Passions to her aid,
When moral scenes, just actions join,
Takes shape, and shows her face divine.

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